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Transcript 1

LEO STRAUSS, NOTES ON LESSING'S *NATHAN THE WISE* (1940 AND 1942)

Editorial note: Leo Strauss's notes on Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1779 play *Nathan the Wise* were prepared for two different occasions. Strauss wrote the first set of notes (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 18, Folder 7, Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library) for a seminar titled "Continental Champions of Freedom of Thought," which he taught at the New School for Social Research in the spring of 1940. The announcement in the 1939/1940 course catalog of the Graduate Faculty of Political and Social Science reads: "410-0. CONTINENTAL CHAMPIONS OF FREEDOM OF THOUGHT—LEO STRAUSS. *Spring term. Fridays, 8:10–10:00 P.M.* The events of the last decades have heightened our interest and increased our understanding of the fight waged by such men as Bayle, Voltaire, and Lessing for freedom of thought. What did they understand by freedom of thought? How did they conceive of its political and institutional implications? To what extent is their view of freedom of thought tinged by the peculiar prejudices of their age? And how did it influence the literary form of their writings?" The second set of notes (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 16, Folder 5) brings together all available drafts for a lecture on "The Political Message of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*." While the exact date is not known, Strauss's remarks in the notes suggest that he gave, or intended to give, the lecture in the General Seminar, the faculty colloquium of the Graduate Faculty, sometime after March 1942.[1]

All translations are my own. The translations from *Nathan the Wise* are taken from a draft translation of the play that Martin Yaffe and I are

preparing for publication. The footnotes as well as the additions in the square […] brackets and translations are by the editor. Angle brackets < … > indicate passages that Strauss crossed out. Strauss's underlinings have been replaced by the volume editors with italics. The editor thanks Jenny Strauss Clay, who gave permission for the publication of these notes and retains her rights to the material.

Notes from a Seminar on "Continental Champions of Freedom of Thought"

(Graduate Faculty, New School for Social Research, 1940)

Nathan der Weise I

A dramatic *poem*—it is not decided whether it is a tragedy or a comedy—only its *dramatic* nature is emphasized.

The occasion: Lessing had been engaged for about 2 years in a violent controversy with the orthodox Lutheranians—his sovereign, the elector of Brunswick, had forbidden him to continue the controversy—he *escaped* into poetry.

(Lessing's ruses: he hid the name of the author of the "fragments," suggesting the name of another dead heretic …)

He escapes into poetry—into a *drama*. What is the peculiar nature of dramatic poetry?

1. The most *vulgar* poetry—it does not even presuppose *reading Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, p.m.[2], p. 91 Ab.[3] 1; 104 col. 1 Ab. 3; 105 col. 1 Ab. 2.[4]
2. In a drama, the poet *never* speaks in his own name. The poet may deceive in particular by the agreement of all *nice* characters …

The subject: The conflict of the 3 great religions is being happily settled in the *holy land* during the *Age of Faith*. The atmosphere of highest religious tensions may be particularly favorable to freedom of the mind—more than the free atmosphere of enlightened 18th century Europe (cf. "Leibniz von den ewigen Strafen": eine Klugheit, für die wir viel zu weise geworden sind [a prudence for which we have become far too wise][5]).

Palestine was then a *Muslim* country > Averroism; Islamic *mono*theism, De tribus impostoribus [Of the Three Impostors].[6]

The leading figure, a *Jew*: the *highest* tension, the highest degree of religious fanaticism may lead to the most radical emancipation > Spinoza—or Maimonides (Leibniz and Mendelssohn).[7]

The Jew is a *merchant*: trade > freedom of the mind.

The action: Nice people belonging to various religions are brought together in an atmosphere hot with religious exclusiveness by a number of strange coincidences, so that they can recognize mutually their *human* dignity, and even their *blood-relationship*.

The action—the happy end—is in accordance with the thesis: Providence, God rewards good actions, done on earth, on earth, "optimism." The religion of providence and optimism is based on *reason* (—nature—charity) ≠ revelation (—miracles—intolerance and pride).

The revelation of that true natural religion is an essential part of the *action*: it establishes the friendship between philosopher and king, without which the happy end would not be brought about.

A number of strange occurrences: *natural* miracles (cf. I 1).

The *real* action is the fate of the hero, Nathan. What happens to *him*? The first scene exhibits the strength of Nathan's *love* of his foster-daughter (Lessing—Malchen[8]). Cf. 227a, top[9] and 227b.[10] The last scene: Nathan seems to become the father of the Knight as well; but he is, as it were, pushed aside by Saladin and Sittah: he *does* lose his child.

He owes that child, not to nature or chance, but to *virtue* (184b bottom[11])—virtue is *not* rewarded on earth.

What about the statement to the contrary (189a[12])? The context: Nathan's prudent medicines. See also 187a[13] in the middle.

Everything depends on our seeing the *difference* between Nathan and the happy family (Saladin, Sittah, Knight, and Recha), on our seeing the *peculiar* character of Nathan.

The perfectly happy end would have been possible *without* Nathan's discussion with Saladin: the Knight is indifferent to religion independently of Nathan (II 5)—Saladin and Sittah are no fanatic people—Recha is so much in love with the Knight that she would have married him anyway.

"Nathan the Wise"—sounds like the name of a king or of a prince (cf. 194b[14]) (—Friedrich der Weise[15]—Friedrich der Grosse[16])

But why Nathan?

The *prophet* Nathan—the prophet who admonished, and reprimanded, those oriental despots David and Solomon (2 Sam 7,12; 1 Kings 1).

— The *wise* Nathan—he does *not* reprimand Saladin—191a[17] (I 3)—his *prudence.*

— Patriarch → the fight between Pope and Emperor > cf. Jacobi's "Etwas das Lessing gesagt hat [Something Lessing Said]."[18]

The inferiority of the "family" at the end as compared with Nathan:

the *child* p[19] etc.)
the *young* Knight—he is rash (cf. 232b[20])
the *confused* Saladin, the bad chess player
the calculating *woman* Sittah.

Only these 4 people, and *not* Nathan, prove to be blood-relatives—this alone shows that the *natural kinship* of all men is *not* considered by Lessing the last word. It is not without good reason that the solution given in the *Nathan*, is so different from that of the *Tempest*: not upon an island, but in the "holy land." The relation of the "ideal" to "reality" is much more directly a *question* in the *Nathan*.

The deeper problem: it is perfectly understandable that Saladin, Knight and Recha, in order to prove to be relatives, ought not to be married—but why is Sittah necessary? Nathan and the 4 others have *no prospect of progeny* → closed and open society, the open society is impossible. Cf. 206b.[21]

The basic miracles: Recha's life is a *gift* of the Knight—the life of the Knight is a *gift* of the Sultan

everyone's life is a *gift* of his father 203b,[22] 204a top,[23] 223b bottom[24]
→ the radical *dependence* of man on man—the radical *servitude* of man to man

The significance of the *Dervish* (206a[25])
Nathan's *prudence*: his manner of teaching (with what ease does he tell stories …). 186b,[26] 187a.[27]

The conflict of Nathan with the Knight: 217b top, 218b top.

Der Tempelherr—der deutsche Bär [the German bear] (195b top[28])—cf. Tellheim[29]—"der menschliche Held [the human hero]" (*Laocoon* IV (10b top))[30] distinguished from, and opposed to, the *Stoic* (the *ideal* philosopher), but also from the *prudent* philosopher Nathan: who is not a "German," but very, very strange: a "Jew."

Nathan der Weise II

The 3 *central* scenes (III 5–7)[31]—in the center of which is the *only monologue* of Nathan.

Saladin has been described in II 1–2 (cf. 205b middle[32]) as a *bad* chess player—Nathan is a *good* chess player (199b[33]).

234a bottom and b top[34]

Saladin believes in vox populi vox Dei [the voice of the people (is) the voice of God]

Saladin's *question*: "What *faith*, what *law* has convinced you?"

The story of the *ring*—what is a ring? a thing which is highly valuable; not easy to destroy or to break; very close to the body, to the naked skin—surrounding it, covering a part of it; an ornament, and not a utensil; an ornament to which a very great usefulness is *ascribed*; *inherited*; an *artificial* thing.

(cf. the comparison of revelation to *chiro*mancy—Hempel XV 267f.[35])

(cf. the explanation of sceptres in *Laocoon* XVI[36])

What Nathan says to begin with, is not much: two rings are forged, only one is genuine—this corresponds to what all Jews, Christians, and Muslims say—he diverges from that view only by saying that it is *almost* impossible to detect the right belief (212a[37]).

(The father = the God of the revealed religions: he loves his sons according to their obedience to him (211b[38])).

He goes one step further: he, Nathan, does not dare to make a distinction between the 3 rings—for *God* made them undistinguishable.

They cannot be distinguished, they are identical, as far as their *reasons* are concerned—they are based on history, on tradition, on faith: everyone must trust most *his* tradition, *his* father (212a[39]).

The Judge does not give his *sentence*, he merely gives his *advice*—he states his sentence surreptitiously: all three rings are not genuine—his *advice* is that each seek to prove the genuine character of his ring by *good actions*, good morality. The sentence will be pronounced by the *Messiah* in 1000 years.

Earlier Draft for the Beginning of a Lecture on "The Political Message of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*"

(General Seminar, New School for Social Research, 1942 or 1943)

Beginning—Many sermons have been preached by liberal rabbis and by liberal ministers, I say nothing of adherents of ethical culture—sermons extolling the lofty message of Lessing's immortal play. I shall not speak of its lofty message, but only of its pedestrian message, its political message. For apart from the fact that I hate to be a bore, I wish to remain within

the boundaries of my competence as far as possible. It is unfortunate for you and even more so for myself, that I have to go beyond these borders on more than one point.

For: The thesis which I am submitting to you in this lecture—to say nothing of the lecture itself—is the product of hours of leisure, not of years of work. It is the thesis, not of [a] scholar, but of an amateur, of a lover. It is uncertain however whether only scholarly work of many years gives a man a right to talk about any subject of more than ephemeral significance; but certain it is that one cannot become a genuine scholar in any field, if one has not been in the first place, and if one does not become again and again, an amateur, a lover. At least potential scholars have the privilege, amounting to a duty, that their leisure alone can justify their work.[40]

Some time ago, I delivered in this seminar a lecture which seemed to some people to reveal an anti-German bias.[41] I am glad to have this opportunity of expressing in a way which, I hope, will not be considered obtrusive, my personal gratitude and my gratitude as a Jew, to a great son of the German nation, to that German whom I happen to love more than any other German, i.e. from whom I learned more than from any other German. That people like myself should avail themselves of opportunities such as these, might well seem to be a duty—in particular in this moment, now extending itself over 10 years, of parting.[42]

When reading, and trying to understand, a work such as the *Nathan*, one ought not to forget—in fact, one cannot forget—for a single moment that the author silently tells us all the time: Tua res agitur: is *thy* case which is under examination.

This means two things: First, one has to apply to oneself the lesson of the *play*—that lesson is, as everyone knows, tolerance and toleration and charity. But the author cannot possibly tell us how we, how each of us, can best apply it in one's own case. Circumstances are decisive in all practical questions, and the circumstances of each of us are different at different times, in different human relations. The translation of the universal principle into a rule sufficient for guidance for an individual situation, this is the practical problem, and this practical problem is *not* solved by the lesson of the play, because the action of the play is of an *idealized* character: that action is as ideal, as unreal as a fairy-tale. There is, however, another lesson, apart from the lesson of the play itself, implied in the play: the lesson of the *author* of the play; by *writing* the *Nathan*, L. shows us how he, this individual, living in these individual circumstances, applied to himself and to his circumstances the universal rule

of tolerance, toleration, and charity. *This* action of the man Lessing, as distinguished from the fairy-tale action of the play, is not ideal nor idealized: it is an actual fact of human experience, hence an *example* which we can try to imitate directly if intelligently. For the thinking reader, at least, the lesson given by the writer is more important than the lesson provided by the characters of the play.

Does this mean that we should have to close the book and study Lessing's life? This would be absurd—for what is Lessing's life except the external conditions for Lessing's thought, and of Lessing's thought we can know practically nothing except for his *books*, and in particular for his *Nathan*. No, we must read and reread the *Nathan*, but we must read it as the work of *Lessing*. This is still very obscure. What I mean is this: We have to consider just one fact of L.'s life, not mentioned at all in the *Nathan*, one fact extraneous to the play itself, which is of decisive importance for the understanding of the play: the fact, I mean, that Lessing was a *Christian*.

Later Draft for the Beginning of a Lecture on "The Political Message of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*"

(General Seminar, New School for Social Research, 1942 or later)

The political message of Lessing's *Nathan the Wise.*

1. The contrast between Lessing's plea for universal religious toleration and the anti-Christian bias of his play.
2. The pro-Jewish bias of the play and its historical reasons.
3. The practical reasons of the pro-Jewish bias: the relation of money and wisdom, or of commerce and open-mindedness.
4. Nathan and the Dervish: the relation between prudent wisdom and imprudent wisdom.
5. Nathan and the Templar: the relation between prudent wisdom and the voice of the heart.
6. Nathan and Saladin: the gulf between the Wise and the enlightened despot.
7. Why does the play not end with a marriage: the limits of tolerance or the nature of political community.

The universal religion of the *Nathan* and L.'s private belief: Introite nam et hic Dii sunt [Enter, for here too are gods].[43] (the *plural.*) The motto of the play: (cf. the change of the motto from Euripides *Ion*[44]).

* * *

The *Nathan* is a plea for mutual toleration of all historical religions, a plea based, not on any particular historical religion, but on universal, rational religion. As regards the different historical religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam—the *Nathan* is strictly speaking neutral. In spite of that fundamental neutrality, however, we observe a definitive anti-Christian bias: the most superior people of the play are a Jew (Nathan) and a Muslim (Dervish), and no Christian reaches their stature. The least sympathetic man: the Patriarch, is a *Christian*. How is that anti-Christian bias, which seems contradictory to L.'s freedom from prejudice, to be accounted for?

a) L. had to choose the most significant *setting* as regards both place and time: the Holy Land—the Age of Faith—the time of the Crusades—at that time, the intellectual superiority of Islam and Judaism to Christianity was a fact: Averroes and Maimonides precede in time Thomas Aquinas.

But this is not a sufficient explanation: Lessing had the poetic freedom to emancipate himself from the historical accidents.

b) L. was a Christian, writing in a Christian country for Christians—a pro-Christian bias was to be expected on all sides. To counteract the pro-Christian bias, it is not enough to speak without any bias—cf. the principle of moral education in *E.N.* II[45]—an anti-Christian bias was called for—L. and his contemporaries had to go through the anti-Christian bias to become truly free from their pro-Christian bias. They had to see Christianity from an anti-Christian angle, from a Jewish or Muslim angle, before they could see it without *any* bias, or before they could see it *philosophically*. (Application to *Merchant of Venice*.) This fact lays a heavy obligation on those interpreters of Lessing who are not Christians—e.g., on those interpreters who happen to be Jews. The *Nathan* has not only a general anti-Christian bias, it has even a pro-Jewish bias (L. was calumniated that he had got money from rich Jews[46]): after all, the hero is a Jew, and Nathan is much more important than the Dervish (so much so that Mr. Bruckner felt himself entitled to omit him altogether from his stage-presentation in the New School).[47] Now, a Jew must be expected to have a pro-Jewish bias if he is not perverted human being—and if he wants to learn anything from L., he must be on his guard exactly against that pro-Jewish bias. There is just the possibility to interpret the *Nathan* as a praise of *the* Jews—hence, the *Nathan* appeals to Jewish self-complacency, which is as natural and as illegitimate as any other self-complacency. Any over-emphasis on the pro-Jewish bias of the *Nathan* is not only a

grave misinterpretation of Lessing's intention but, if done by a Jew, a sign that he has learned *nothing* from L.: *the* attitude of L. toward Christianity must be the model for the attitude of the Jewish interpreter of L. toward Judaism.

I would like to say one more word about this point which you may be inclined to dismiss as merely methodological or moral—because it is not always considered in any discussion bearing on the Jewish question. Jews, I feel, are under a particular obligation not to be self-complacent—self-complacency is the characteristic feature of the Philistine—Jews are not Philistines, in fact, they are enemies of the Philistines since time immemorial: Samson—but they are *neighbors* of the Philistines. Now, *Vayehi beshallach Par'oh* . . . [And it was in Pharaoh's sending-away . . .][48]—Jews are always in danger to prefer the short way through the land of the Philistines to the long way through the desert—sometimes, they succumb to that danger, and then something happens which reminds us, to quote Jeremia—*Zakharti lakh chesed ne'urayikh, veg*[*omer*] [I remember for you[r sake] the kindness/grace of your youth etc.].[49]

Why did L. choose a Jew as the hero of his play?—The particular character of the Jews: why is a Jew the ideal representation of "Wisdom"? The particular *difficulty* for Jews: the Tempelherr's remark on the Jews' responsibility for intolerance (εὐσέβεια [piety] περισσότης[50] [superfluity, excess]): it is particularly *difficult* for Jews—and hence, it is *most convincing* if a Jew can do it. The comedy *The Jews* and J. D. Michaelis' reaction to it.[51] L. knew better: his friendship with Moses Mendelssohn (he was L.'s best friend, in spite of the remarkable difference of intellectual level). More important: Maimonides, the greatest Jew of the Middle Ages, and perhaps of the whole post-Biblical period of Judaism, and Leibniz' judgment on him.[52]

PART IV
NOTE ON *NATHAN*

The *most common* aspect of the Jews: traders, merchants, financiers—*money*—what have *these* things to do with wisdom? Are they not connected rather with *worldly prudence*, not to say with slyness? Or should there be a profound connection between wisdom and prudence? The relation between philosophy (freedom of mind) and trade: Athens vs. Sparta; modern western philosophy vs. monasteries.

Nathan and the Dervish:

> Nathan wise *and* prudent
> the Dervish merely wise.

L.'s teaching is that wisdom and prudence are not separable, that wisdom without prudence is available, but not really wise. (Socrates did not separate from each other wisdom and σωφροσύνη [prudence]).

N.'s wise prudence "in action": his educating Recha etc.

More general remark: the error to identify the teaching of the *Nathan* with Lessing's own belief—cf. Fittbogen[53] and F. H. Jacobi[54] on the relevance of the *Nathan*. Mendelssohn.[55]

L.'s belief: his conversation with Jacobi

— there is no other philosophy than that of Spinoza—[56]

— philosophy is in *no* book—*not* in the *Ethics*—[57]

non ridere, nec lugere, non indulgere, sed intelligere [neither to laugh nor to cry nor to pander, but to understand].[58]

Then raise from practice to speculation.

Application to the lesson of the *Nathan:* tolerance—to be considered in the light of the action: the happy family—but no prospect of progeny—"Ernst und Falk" on *the* political problem: (you can be a left-wing Tory or a right-wing Whig—but no wise man will be a right-wing Tory or a left-wing Whig.)[59]

Lessing's alleged sentimentality—

MM's [Moses Mendelssohn's] remarks on his coldness

(see laments of MM in Kayserling[60]).

Notes

1. On Strauss's lectures in the General Seminar, see Hannes Kerber, "'Jerusalem and Athens' in America: On the Biographical Background of Leo Strauss's Four Eponymous Lectures from 1946, 1950, and 1967, and an Abandoned Book Project from 1956/1957," in *Journal for the History of Modern Theology / Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 29, no. 1 (2022), 90–132, especially 95–100 and 124–26.

2. In his private notes, Strauss uses "p.m." (penes me, Latin for "in my possession") to refer to books from his personal library.

3. "Ab." is short for "Absatz" (German for "paragraph").

4. Strauss refers to sections 2, 11, and 12 in Lessing's *The Hamburg Dramaturgy*. The edition he uses is *Gesammelte Werke in zwei Bänden* (Leipzig: Göschen'sche Verlagshandlung, 1855), vol. 2.

5. The passage from Lessing's *Leibniz on Eternal Punishments* reads in full: "[Leibniz] did no more and no less than what all the ancient philosophers used to do in their *exoteric* presentation. He displayed a prudence which our most recent philosophers have, of course, become far too wise to employ. He willingly set his own system aside and tried to lead each individual along the path to truth on which he found him."

6. The rumor of a treatise entitled *Of the Three Impostors* surfaced in the thirteenth century and circulated through the eighteenth century. The treatise was said to deny the truth of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, with the "impostors" of the title being Jesus, Moses, and Muhammad. See Leo Strauss to Jacob Klein, February 16, 1938, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997), vol. 3, 549: "You know the rumor (*Rede*) of the book *De tribus impostoribus*, which the bibliographers are looking for in vain: supposedly, it was written by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, by Averroes etc. etc., but it does not exist. (The book by the same title was written by the end of the 17th century.) Well—one does not find 'De tribus impostoribus' for the simple reason that one is *searching* for it while it is in everyone's hands: it is the *Moreh* (resp. the works of Averroes and Farabi, not to speak of other surprises which are possible in this regard—I do not want to ask too much of my reluctant pen)."

7. See below, note 52.

8. Lessing was strongly attached to his stepdaughter Amalie "Malchen" König, who, aged sixteen when her mother (and Lessing's wife) Eva died in childbed in 1778, took over his household. Lessing repeatedly denied rumors that he intended to marry her after his wife had passed away.

9. "And although sevenfold love soon bound me to this solitary foreign girl; although the thought kills me that in her I am to lose my seven sons once more:—if providence demands her out of my hands again—I shall obey." (IV/7, v. 694–99.)

10. God! if after all I could still keep the girl and purchase such a son-in-law for myself besides!" (IV/7, v. 740.)

11. "Everything else I that own, nature and fortune have allotted to me. This possession alone I owe to virtue." (I/1, v. 33–36.)

12. "For God rewards a good done here, yet here too. " (I/2, v. 358–359)

13. "Nathan: Yet if only a human — a human as nature grants them every day provided you this service: he'd have to be an angel for you. He'd have to be and would be. Recha: Not an angel in that way; no! a real one; he was for certain a real one! — Haven't you, you yourself taught me it's a possibility that angels do exist, that God could also do miracles to benefit those who love him? I do love him. Nathan: And he loves you; and does in every hour miracles for you and those like you; yes, did them for you already from all eternity. Recha: I like hearing that. Nathan: What? Since it would sound totally natural,

totally mundane, if an actual Templar had rescued you: should it be therefore any less a miracle? — The greatest of miracles is that true and genuine miracles can become and should become so mundane for us. But for this general miracle, a thinking person would hardly ever have dubbed miracle what only children should so call, who, gawking, follow only the most unusual, only the most novel." (I/2, v. 201–24.)

14. "Daja: His people worship him as a prince. But that they call him the wise Nathan, and not instead the rich one, has often surprised me. Knight Templar: To his nation rich and wise are possibly the same. Daja: But above all they should have called him the good one. For you cannot imagine at all how good he is." (I/6, v. 738–43.)

15. Frederick III (1463–1525), Elector of Saxony, known as "Frederick the Wise."

16. Frederick II (1712–1786), King of Prussia, known as "Frederick the Great."

17. "Enough! stop! ... Al-Hafi, make sure to go back into your desert soon. I'd fear precisely among humans you might forget to be a human." (I/3, v. 490, 496–99.)

18. In *Something Lessing Said: A Commentary on Journeys of the Popes* (1782), Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi reports the following anecdote: "This I heard Lessing say: What Febronius and his followers maintained was shameless flattery of the princes; for all their reasons against the rights of the pope were either no reasons or else twice and thrice as applicable to the princes themselves. Everyone was capable of grasping this; and the fact that no one among the many whose urgent business it would be to point this out has yet said so publicly, with all the conciseness and sharpness such an issue permits and deserves, was odd enough and an extremely bad sign."

19. "Recha: My father, if I'm wrong, you know I don't like being wrong. Nathan: You rather do like being taught." (I/2, v. 275–77.)

20. Reference to V/5, v. 311–49.

21. Reference to III/1, v. 16–64.

22. Reference to II/5, v. 504—II/6, v. 541.

23. "It is not enough that I still exist by his behest, that I still live because of his will: now I must also await him to tell me according to whose will I have to live." (II/7, v. 577–80.)

24. "What right would Nathan have to her, if he is not her father? The one who saved her life becomes the sole heir to the rights of him who gave it to her." (IV/5, v. 462–66.)

25. Reference to II/9, v. 713—III/1, v. 16.

26. Reference to I/1, v. 144—I/2, v. 187.

27. Reference to I/2, v. 188–227.

28. "Then go, you German bear! Go!—And yet I must not lose track of the animal." (I/6, v. 786f.)

29. Major von Tellheim is one of the two key figures in Lessing's 1763/1767 play *Minna von Barnhelm or the Soldiers' Happiness*.

30. "While the lamentations are those of a human being, the actions are those of a hero. Both combined make up the human hero, who is neither womanish nor hardened, but appears at one moment the former, at another time the latter, just as nature demands him to be at one time, and principles and duty demand at another. He is the highest being that wisdom could conceive and art could imitate." The page number refers to the edition mentioned in note 4.

31. In a footnote at the bottom of the page, LS corrects himself: "Not quite correct—the 3rd act has *10* scenes—the *two central* scenes (III 5–6) *precede* the scene where the story of the rings is told (= III 7)."

32. "Al-Hafi: He heeds me not at all, and with contempt throws the whole game into clumps. Nathan: Is that possible? Al-Hafi: And says: he'd simply want it to be checkmate, he'd want! You call that playing? Nathan: Hardly so, you call it gaming the game." (II/9, v. 682–86)

33. "He possesses understanding; he knows how to live; he plays chess well." (II/2, v. 276.)

34. Reference to V/6, v. 400–466.

35. At the end of the first section of his *Counter-Propositions* to the "Fragments by an Unnamed Author," Lessing compares theological and chiromantic proofs: "It is at least certain that the transition from purely rational truths to revealed ones is enormously disagreeable if one has become spoiled by the precise as well as comprehensible proofs of the former. One then expects and demands the *same* clarity and comprehensibility from the proofs of the latter, and one holds anything not proved *in the same way* not to be proved *at all*. I recall here what happened to me in my youth. I wanted to study mathematics, and I was given the elder Sturm's *Tables*, in which chiromancy was still included among the mathematical sciences. When I encountered this, I did not know what hit me. My limited understanding [*Verstand*] suddenly ceased to operate altogether; and although an art which promised to acquaint me with my future destiny held no small attraction for me, I felt as if I had exchanged a pleasant wine for insipid sugar-water when I transferred my attention to it from geometry. I did not know what to think of a man who had combined two such disparate things in *one* book; I took my leave of him and sought another teacher instead. But had I been obliged to regard this man as infallible, the question-begging principles of chiromancy, whose arbitrariness was so apparent to me, would have filled me with fear and distrust toward those mathematical truths which were so comfortable to my understanding [*Verstand*], even though I had grasped some of them only by memory. I could not possibly have regarded them both, geometry, and chiromancy, as equally certain; but I might well have come to regard chiromancy and geometry as equally uncertain. I hardly think it worth the effort to repudiate the suspicion that I am trying to insinuate that the proofs of revelation and the proofs of chiromancy are of equal weight. They are, of course, not of equal weight; their specific weights are unequivocally incommensurable; but both proofs nevertheless belong to one and the same class, both are based on testimonies

and on empirical propositions. And the contrast between the strongest proofs of this kind and proofs which flow from the nature of things is so striking that every art designed to reduce this striking divergence and to smooth it out by introducing all kinds of intermediate gradations is futile."

36. In section XVI of his *Laocoon*, Lessing gives the following explanation of Homer's account of Agamemnon's shield (*Iliad* 2.101–108): "I should not be surprised to discover that one of the ancient commentators of Homer had admired this passage as the most perfect allegory of the origin, the progress, the establishment and the hereditary succession of royal might [*Gewalt*] among men. Admittedly, I should smile if I were to read that the maker of the shield, Vulcan, (as the fire, as that which is most necessary for the preservation of man) points to the elimination of wants as such which moved the first men to subject themselves to one individual;—that the first king was a son of Time (*Zeus Kroniōn*), a venerable old man, who wished to share his power [*Macht*] with, or wholly confer it to, an eloquent, prudent man, a Mercury (*Diaktorōi Argeiphontēi*);—that the prudent orator relinquished his supreme might [*Gewalt*] to the bravest warrior (*Pelopi plēxippōi*), when the young state was threatened by foreign enemies;—that the brave warrior, after subduing the enemies and securing the kingdom, passed it on to his son, who, being a peaceful ruler, as a benevolent shepherd of his peoples (*poimēn laōn*), made them acquainted with luxury and abundance, whereby after his death the wealthiest of his relatives (*poluarni thuestēi*) had the way open to acquire by means of presents and bribes that which hitherto confidence had conferred and which merit had considered more a burden than an honor, and to secure it forever as a kind of purchased estate of his family. I should smile, but I would, nonetheless, be confirmed in my esteem for the poet, from whom so much can be loaned."

37. Reference to III/7, v. 432–76.

38. "So now this ring came, from son to son, ultimately to a father of three sons, all three of whom were equally obedient to him, all three of whom he consequently could not help loving equally." (III/7, v. 413–16.)

39. "Now whose trust and faith does one then least raise doubt about? Isn't it of those who are one's own? isn't it of those whose blood we are? isn't it of those who've given us tokens of their love from childhood on? who never have deceived us except where being deceived was more salutary for us? — How can I believe my fathers less than you do yours? Or the reverse. — Can I demand of you that you give the lie to your forebears in order not to contradict mine?" (III/7, v. 463–73.)

40. Cf. Leo Strauss, "Eine Erinnerung an Lessing," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2nd ed., ed. Heinrich Meier (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2013), vol. 2, 607: "The present explanation of Lessing's intentions is the attempt of an amateur, not a scholar; it is the fruit of hours of leisure, not years of labor. It is uncertain whether only years of scholarly labor earn one the right to an amateurish exposition. But certain it is that no one becomes a proper scholar without having been an amateur at first and becoming an amateur over and over again. Scholars in

the making have the obligatory privilege that only their leisure justifies their labor."

41. Strauss here refers to his "German Nihilism" lecture, delivered on February 26, 1941, in the Graduate Faculty's General Seminar. See Leo Strauss, "German Nihilism," ed. David Janssens and Daniel Tanguay, *Interpretation* 26, no. 3 (1999): 353–78, with Wiebke Meier, "Corrections to Leo Strauss, 'German Nihilism,'" *Interpretation* 28, no. 1 (2000), 33–34.

42. Cf. Leo Strauss, "Eine Erinnerung an Lessing," 608: "Besides, the author was not unmindful of the obligation of thanks which is owed by his nation to that great son of the German nation, especially at this moment of parting and of farewell."

43. This is the motto of Lessing's *Nathan*. Lessing consciously misattributes this line to Aulus Gellius ("Apud Gellium"), indicating that he is aware that Aristotle attributes it to Heraclitus (*De partibus animalium*, 645a15–23).

44. For the Greek motto of his unpublished fragment *Bibliolatry*, Lessing makes free use of three verses from Euripides's *Ion*: "Noble, O Christ, is the labor I perform in front of your house to honor the prophetic place."

45. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics,* probably bk. 2, ch. 1.

46. In *Further Correction of the Tale of 1,000 Ducats, or Judas Iscariot the Second*, Lessing denies the rumor that the Jews of Amsterdam had paid him money to publish the anti-Christian "Fragments by an Unnamed Author."

47. In March 1942, Ferdinand Bruckner's free adaptation of *Nathan the Wise* played eleven times at Erwin Piscator's Studio Theatre at the New School for Social Research. According to the New School's Bulletin (February 16, 1942), this performance was "the first professional performance in English of 'Nathan the Wise.'" It was adopted by the Belasco Theatre on Broadway. In February and March 1944, Piscator staged the same version of Lessing's play again at the Studio Theater.

48. Strauss here quotes the beginning of Exodus 13:17: "And it was in Pharaoh's sending-away [the people, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines though it was near . . .]."

49. Strauss here quotes the ninth through twelfth Hebrew words of Jeremiah 2:2

50. Strauss's 1948 notebook on Plato's *Euthyphro* revolves around the question whether piety is "περιττόν [superfluous]." See *Leo Strauss on Plato' "Euthyphro": The 1948 Notebook, with Lectures and Critical Writings*, ed. Hannes Kerber and Svetozar Y. Minkov (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023), 49–50, 124, and 127–28.

51. Lessing's one-act *The Jews* attempts, as he himself puts it, "to show virtue to the vulgar in a place where they did not suspect to find it at all." Johann David Michaelis famously faulted the play for a highly improbable presentation of a Jew with an impeccable moral character: "It is indeed not impossible, but all too unlikely that such a noble temperament could have as it were formed itself among a people whose principles, way of life, and education color their dealings with Christians all too noticeably with animosity,

or at least with a decided cold-bloodedness against Christians. This implausibility was a hinderance to our pleasure, the more so that we wish this noble and beautiful image had truth and reality to it. But even mediocre virtue and honesty are so rarely to be found among this people that the few examples cannot diminish as much as one would like the hatred felt against them." *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* 70 (June 13, 1754), 621.

52. On the first sheet of his extensive excerpts from Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*, Leibniz notes: *Egregium video esse librum Rabbi Mosis Maimonidis, qui inscribitur Doctor perplexorum, et magis philosophicum quam putaram, dignumque adeo lectione attenta. Fuit in philosophia, mathematicis, medica arte, denique sacrae scripturae intelligentia insignis*. [. . .] *Profitetur se parabolarum legis veram intelligentiam aperire; timuisse scriber quia, inquit, talia sunt de quibus nullus ex gente nostra in hac captivitate quicquam scripsit hactenus*. ("I find the book by Rabbi Moses Maimonides, entitled *Guide of the Perplexed*, is excellent and more philosophical than I had suspected, worthy of attentive reading. He was distinguished in philosophy, mathematics, the medical art, and finally his understanding of Sacred Scripture. [. . .] He promises to reveal the true understanding of the parables of the law. 'I fear to write,' he says, 'since these are things of which none of our people in captivity has hitherto written anything.'") Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Philosophische Schriften* (Berlin: Berlin Akademie, 2006), vol. 4, pt. A, no. 424, 2484.

53. See Gottfried Fittbogen, *Die Religion Lessings* (Leipzig: 1923), 148–82.

54. In *Against Mendelssohn's Imputations Regarding the Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza* (1786), Jacobi explains his interpretation of *Nathan the Wise*: "The intention [*Absicht*] of this poem is so clear as day that it comes to every reader on its own; the intention to make suspect the spirit [*Geist*] of all revelation and present every system of religion, without any distinction, *as a system* in a hateful light."

55. In his *Morning Hours or Lectures on God's Existence* (Berlin: 1786), 268f., Mendelssohn interprets *Nathan the Wise* as "a kind of *Anti-Candide*" and a "glorious paean in praise of providence (*Lobgedicht auf die Vorsehung*)" (*Morgenstunden oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes*, 129f.).

56. In the anonymously published *On Spinoza's Doctrine in Letters to Mister Moses Mendelssohn* (1785), Jacobi reports that Lessing told him in 1780: "There is no other philosophy but the philosophy of Spinoza."

57. Jacobi records the following conversation in *On Spinoza's Doctrine*: "Leßing: Then we shall not fall out over our credo. I: Let's not do that in any case. But my credo is not to be found in Spinoza. Leßing: I hope it's not to be found in any book. I. Not just that. I believe in an intelligent personal cause of the world. Leßing. Oh, so much the better! Then I must get to hear something quite new."

58. Spinoza declares in the *Political Treatise* (I, 4, 10, 2) that he carefully attempted "neither to laugh at nor cry about nor to despise, but to understand human actions (*humanas actiones non ridere, non lugere, neque detestari, sed intelligere*)."

59. At the beginning of the second dialogue of Lessing's *Ernst and Falk: Dialogues for Freemasons*, the freemason Falk calls himself a "heretical (*kätzerischer*) freemason."

60. See, for example, Meyer Kayserling, *Moses Mendelssohn: Sein Leben und Wirken*, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1888), 55, 263, 366, 368, and 445.